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THE CHARM OF WASHINGTON

BY HENRY LEACH

OF the great cities I have known, lived in for a while, and tried to understand, Washington, capital of the United States, seems to me to exert more than almost any other that special influence upon the mind of a receptive traveler of "growing upon us," as it is said. When we remark that a town or a country "grows upon us"—this odd idiom being used chiefly of places—we pay it a compliment. We agree upon its solid worth. We suggest that its beauties, its qualities, its richness, do not lie upon the surface; it wears not its virtues upon its sleeve. Here is nothing pretentious, nothing gaudy and meretricious, no blatant self-advertisement or the material and spiritual shoddiness that is often its companion. And, saying that a city grows upon us, we covertly pay a compliment also to ourselves for our discrimination and our standards; because the cities that thus increase and strengthen in our appreciation do so not by their material but by their spiritual worth. This is not to be disputed. Paris and Rome and Madrid grow upon us. But Paris leaps gigantically in our minds from the outset, because she is brilliant and rich from the surface through; like a magnet, she draws the stranger to her when he is far away; she enchants him at the first glance upon her smiling, keen, and classic countenance, and he is lost with her thereafter, for her charm never ceases to increase. Thus Paris grows upon us in a peculiar and intensified sense, as other cities never could. If anyone informs you that he or she cares nothing for Paris, you may with confidence draw certain conclusions. Rome also grows upon us,

more subtly and with subdued ecstasies; but Rome begins with vast advantages from the past. Few stay long enough in Madrid to understand the peculiar attractiveness of the Castilian city, which is cold and sombre at the first glance, and so its merit is the more as its attraction fast increases, which is commonly the case. Our foreign friends of taste and understanding almost all agree that London grows upon them, and often they say that at the outset they find it imbued with a certain cold, insular dullness; that unfamiliar Northern tints—copper, an infinite range of grays and opalescent—play through the lights of the cooler seasons with a strange effect, which somehow conveys to the mind an impression of strength, of austerity perhaps, but yet of something that needs consideration and will yield reward for it. As London grows so much upon the Briton, and even upon the Londoner himself, it must surely exert that process upon the stranger too.

But Washington is different from all others. It exercises a strange influence, this newest and rawest of capitals, which yet in some sense in these straining times becomes the chief capital, the most influential city of them all. It is a fountain of capacity for war and victory. From here the supreme direction of the material and spiritual forces of the United States, brought into the conflict for our needed support and for the good of humanity, is made by a far-seeing and well-minded statesman and the men he has about him. Here is the seat of government; here are the halls of the great departments, the vast administrative machinery, the Capitol,

the national archives, and the majestic symbols of the birth and the fine maturity of the capital of the freest people. When we have been a little time in Washington we begin to feel this, and the feeling deepens as understanding increases. To know even a little of America one must have a fair working intimacy with New York, Boston, Chicago, and Washington, for these are the strong types, the powerful individualities. They are all very different, stand sometimes for opposite departments of labor and thought, and even, as one might almost say, of attitude to life. Washington, indeed, is very different from the others. She does not hum and sing with industries as they do; there is a certain staidness and a calm about her. She hustles little, reflects the more, feels the responsibility upon her. She, too, like our London, has her austerity. Whirled in a parlor car on an afternoon express through Philadelphia and Baltimore, from the glitter and warm life of New York to the dignified city, consecrated with the name of the great man who fought for the establishment of the independent American Republic, and was her first President, a traveler feels, therefore, a little chilled on arrival; yet through experience he knows he has but to bide, and a great influence and impression will come upon him. On the day I first went to Washington I realized that it did not bear its greatness upon the surface, despite the magnificence of the Capitol, of the Congressional Library, and of the Washington Monument, tall, plain, gaunt, and sharp. In after-days one came to realize that there was a certain hint, if unconsciously made, in the lines that are cut over one of the arches of the grand façade of the Union Railway Station (which is itself a fine and impressive thing): "He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies must carry the wealth of the Indies with him; so it is in travel-

ing—a man must carry knowledge with him if he would bring home knowledge." You must take with you to Washington, if not the spirit of a true American, a real and sincere appreciation of what he is and what he stands for, the value of his ideals, the dignity of his vast labor, and the greatness of his country. Then, with a sense of that greatness within you, the glory of Washington may be revealed. There will be enchantment then. I remember doing, without preconceived intention, during an interval on my second day in the place, something to which I had not been moved since last in London, an affair that is not a common occupation or diversion with Englishmen in America—namely, wandering through some second-hand bookshops which made a display in a leading thoroughfare. It was a rare and fruitful entertainment. Unexpected American revelations were vouchsafed—an old French book such as is not easily procurable nowadays, and a volume (printed and published in New York) of Robert Louis Stevenson's stories, including "The Merry Men" and "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," in one of the most tasteful editions that I have encountered. As one of those who are inclined to inquire into the origin of impulses and instincts, I have sometimes wondered why others like myself have turned so naturally to the old bookshops in Washington and scarcely elsewhere in that land.

Indeed it grows; it mounts in the mind; it begins to sing to the surprised wanderer the thrilling, romantic song of the pride and wonder of national effort, the dignity of freedom, the grandeur of ideals and sincerity. This is the capital of freedom, and the emblem of power and strength. Soon in Washington you begin to perceive, amid much that is simple, and much, again, that is impressive, that, with more reserve and more sedateness than are witnessed in

other American cities, Washington has a certain proper consciousness of its meaning and its matchless strength. It was rising to supremacy before the outbreak of the war; today it has taken the good nations by the hand and walks with them, giving them succor that they need. We cannot now speak of *the* greatest nation. There are ways in which each of three or four is greatest, and in some dominant matters it is now certainly and clearly the fact that the United States is the greatest of us all. She entered the war at the crisis when, without her, the world might well have been lost, and besides men and things she gives to her friends the gold which is needed and in which she is the richest of all. Today, therefore, Washington is indeed at the very heart of things, is in some respects the capital of the world. And yet when Paris and Rome and London, each of which has a history that fades back into the dim distance of the farthest past, so that it is then given over to the gods and they are credited with the origins of these centers of man—when these were very old, almost as we know them now, there was still no Washington at all. It was but a patch of wild and virgin America, with prairie and woods expanding toward the flowing Potomac. And now it is a chief of cities. Day by day we read in the papers of the mighty things, truly mighty, that are being determined upon and set on foot at Washington. London, Paris, Rome—they look to Washington. Germany pretends she fears no Washington, yet knows the fateful meaning of that name to her. As General Washington in his own day fought for freedom, so does the city to which his name was given stand more for freedom now than ever before. One seems to imagine his spirit come from Mount Vernon, where he lived, not far away, and, brooding upon this place, strengthening the determination of her people, steeling

their hearts for the sorrows that must precede the final triumph. I feel, indeed, that the spirit of this immortal broods over the portentous city. When you see the white Capitol shining in the moonlight you may think so. But otherwise there are no fairies and but little legend about this fine and practical and well-ordered city, where hard sense is talked and thought, and cold decisions made, which are then driven through with the tremendous force of a hundred millions of free men in a land which even yet is extremely young. No god or demigod pitched upon Washington for the place of his fateful headquarters; Jupiter and Juno, Apollo and Venus—they seem all to have ceased their loves and their quarrels, or at least to have betaken themselves to some heavenly privacy long before the time when the new city, which was to be big with human fate, like Troy and Rome, was shaped.

Its story is wonderful in simplicity, and here again we see the impingement of French intimacy and affection in the early history of this great State. The American Republic having been founded, when freedom had been achieved, a capital became necessary. This was a matter to be gravely thought upon; eternity was being handled. Three existing cities were chiefly considered, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, and there were inevitably sharp discussions, keen jealousies, and a general dissatisfaction. So Congress then did rightly, for it called George Washington, the President and empowered him to select a site for a new federal city that should be laid out and built, and made beautiful and great, on the banks of the Potomac River. He chose this place, and it is said that it was one over which, in his young days as a surveyor, he had lingered admiringly, feeling that some fine use should be made of land so fair. Most great cities lie in saucers with hills about them;

by this is yielded a sense of comfort and compactness, scenic beauties are provided, and the hills give shelter from the blasts and bear fortifications against the enemy. Of the old cities that are not built by the seashore there are hardly any of consequence, except Madrid (which is high up on a tableland), that do not, in varying measure, conform to this rule. By it Washington abides. It is laid out on the lower lands, with bluffs about it on every side, and as it has expanded the residences of the people have begun to creep up these hillsides. And, the site being agreed upon, it was one of the French officers who had fought in the American army who was commissioned to lay out the new city. It is said that he drew the plans on a scale which was intended to be commensurate with the importance of the city as the capital of the United States, and that, though the details were modified in some measure by his successors, it is to him that the general plan of Washington, with its considerable beauty today, is due. The streets and avenues, regular and symmetrical, radiate from the Capitol. Wonderful streets they are, from thirty to fifty yards in width, and parks with them that, all combined, exceed in proportionate area those of any other city in the world. As we emerge from the Union Station the first note of space with parks is struck, and it is repeated continually. There are three thousand, six hundred acres of parks in Washington—and some of them may yet be put to food. Less than three years after Major L'Enfant of the French Army had begun a greater and more important planning of a city than had ever been done before, or has been done since, the Capitol was begun, and in 1800 one wing of what is now the central building had been finished, and Congress met there for the first time. It needed eleven more years to complete the second wing. Now, when the

present European War was only three weeks old there occurred a centenary—and we British have always been given to noting and celebrating these periods—which was discreetly overlooked. We heard nothing of it. Somebody must have noticed it, but wisely decided to be silent and keep the secret still. It is only when delving into these matters that one discovers it, and now it really does not matter. On August 24, 1814, two British commanders, Ross and Cockburn, bore down on Washington, and "the redcoat mob," as it is described in American works (and very well may we forgive in present times, as we could before them, this form of sentiment), gathered in the Hall of Representatives, and Admiral Cockburn, in the Speaker's chair, put the question, "Shall this harbor of Yankee democracy be burned? All for it say 'Aye!'" The "ayes" had it: the building was fired, and only the walls were left standing, the President's house sharing a similar fate. For proof that we are not mere opportunists in expressing regret for this piece of stupidity now, that it is not another sad example of an expediency which is rampant through the world in these times of war, one may quote the simple judgment upon it contained in one sentence of John Richard Green's shorter history of our country: "Few more shameful acts are recorded in our history; and it was the more shameful in that it was done under strict orders from the government at home." It is not to our moral advantage to overlook these things, to say that they should be forgotten by ourselves and, if possible, by others. Britain, which is great, now understands that all mankind is weak, and that the effort for self-purification should be unceasing. We who see with truth so many faults in other peoples. . . . No Briton of authority, so far as one remembers, had spoken in an American Parliament House from that

time until a few weeks ago, when Mr. Balfour made his stirring speech in the Capitol, with the President of the Republic listening attentively from the gallery. It is true; circumstances change with times.

One sometimes suspects that we of the Old World are committed too much to blind belief in the virtues of mere age. The great movements in art and literature in Europe, especially in Italy, France, and elsewhere, gave the original models, in all the splendor of their inspiration and genius, to the world, and, until all standards change, nothing may equal the magnificence of those spiritual efforts. In that the worship of the past is right; but do we not too often deny, or perhaps not so much deny as overlook, the quality, the beauty, and the worth of modern work in which advantage is taken of those rare models of the past, where there is some copying by the cleverest copyists, and something perhaps a little second-hand about the general inspiration? America has for the most part naturally and inevitably reached to the Old World and the past for models. When acquiring a surface grandeur to be the complement of the strength and wealth beneath she was too young and too busy for original inspiration and genius, and too hurried to wait for it. There she is, the child among nations, but with public buildings in every town, made with great solidity and with noble columns that strike tremendously upon the traveler's senses. In Boston, New York (consider the Public Library there), and other cities there are many of them. Europe, with all its expenditure on armies and navies before the war, could not afford to be building such things, which are the delights of the freer and newer nations; and Washington abounds in them. When time has mellowed them, and ages have passed along, their beauties will be better; and when history has clustered about

those walls and pillars, as it is so quickly doing now, their beauty will be the more enhanced by all the perfumes of patriotic sentiment. But that old prejudice has too much prevented wanderers from appreciating the triumphs of art in great masses in America. He is a poor fellow with a thin spirit who may wander through the great halls of the Capitol and the Congressional Library in Washington and not be moved by the artistic magnificence, the noble strength, the perfect taste of what he looks upon therein. The old Florentines and Venetians, were they in life again, would pay more heed to and gain more pleasure from the beauties of the Capitol than do some of the affected tourists; for the truth is that the Capitol, outside and inside, is one of the noblest halls in full existence. Its outside architecture is grand. As it stands an enormous pile on Capitol Hill, its dignity, grace, and beauty of design are splendid; and within its halls and corridors, its magnificent statuary, the vast canvases upon the great events in American history, the mural decorations, and the ceilings with all their allegories make us think better of America at every glance and thought. Ascend one of the surrounding hills late on a summer afternoon and look below to Washington; see the Potomac swirling by, the point of the Washington Monument touching the sky, and, in majestic presidency over all the fine buildings that are grouped about, the white Capitol glistening in the sunlight, and your sense and imagination will then lead you back to some of those great pictures you had gazed upon in the halls of the national headquarters a day or two before. There was the landing of Columbus on San Salvador, De Soto's discovery of the Mississippi, the baptism of Pocahontas, the embarkation of the Pilgrims, the Declaration of Independence, the surrender of Burgoyne, Washington declining over-

tures from Cornwallis at Yorktown, Cornwallis's surrender, General Washington's resignation. Here is no small history of man. Looking thus upon the Capitol, reflecting, we must come to a newer and fuller realization of the tremendous meaning of that simple descriptive phrase, "the New World." There are still some vacant spaces on the walls of the Capitol. New and even greater scenes will be represented in the pictures that a few years hence will be hung upon them, pictures of battles and of even finer freedom than America has yet thought of. . . . Day by day now we hear from Washington of the millions

and more millions of money that are being gathered for the war, of the millions that are being sent to France, to Italy, to Britain. Those American millions of every kind have a different meaning for us from that which once they had. Washington has just told us that over nine millions of American men, women and children subscribed to the last loan, the Liberty Loan. Next in impressiveness to the Capitol, the great national symbol is the Treasury at Washington, the storehouse of all the nation's millions. One must write more of Washington.

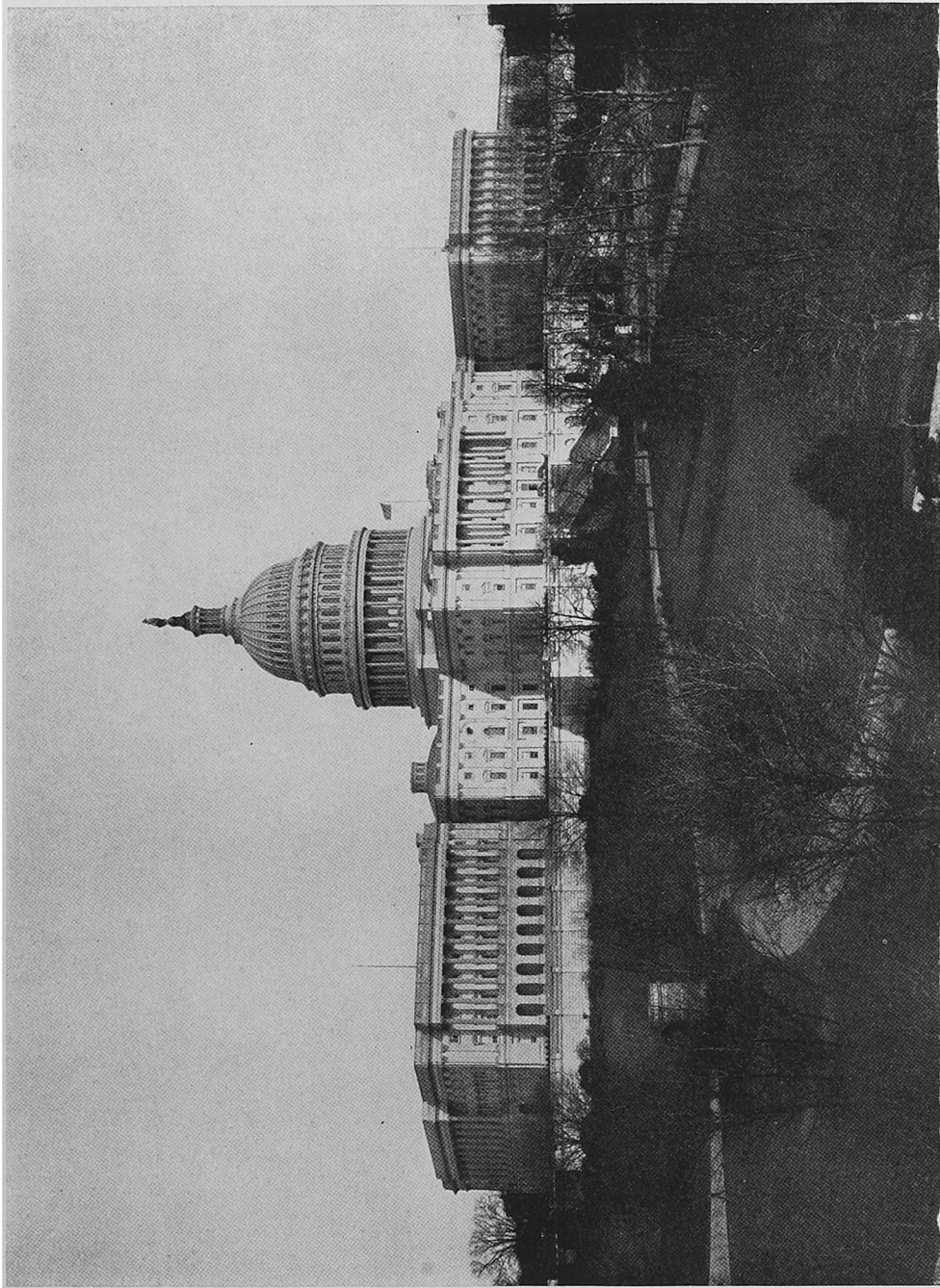
—*Chambers Journal.*

MY LADY POVERTY

By F. BONE

Riches are out of fashion now,
 My Lady Poverty's in town,
 A great surprise upon her brow,
 A gold edge to her russet gown.
 Sun laid the shadow on her hair,
 There is no shadow in her eyes,
 Old are they, but both deep and fair,
 And Heaven's blue has made them wise.
 All shod with silver sandals brave
 She left her hills to walk our way,
 "Lady, your benison I crave
 Upon my weary trudge today."
 Her low voice thrilled me when she spoke,
 Pure music, as a throstle sings,
 But underneath her homespun cloak
 I saw that she had folded wings.

—*The Poetry Review.*



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THE CAPITOL AT WASHINGTON

"The old Florentines and Venetians, were they in life again, would pay more heed to and gain more pleasure from the beauties of the Capitol than do some of the affected tourists; for the truth is that the Capitol, outside and inside, is one of the noblest halls in full existence. As it stands an enormous pile on Capitol Hill, its dignity, grace, and beauty of design are splendid."

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